



# BRIEFING ON AN EDUCATIONAL SEMINAR FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY OF AFRICAN ORTHODOX SEMINARY



11<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2015

NAIROBI, KENYA



*Sitting from left to right, the General Adviser of PROCMURA, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah, Archbishop Makarios of Kenya, the Deputy Dean, Fr. Phillip Mugadizi, with PROCMURA and Orthodox African Seminary staff standing at the back*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

PROCMURA organised for a one day Educational Seminar on Wednesday, 11th of February, 2015 at the PROCMURA Meeting and Conference Centre to a group of students and a section of Staff from the African Orthodox Church Seminary in Africa. The Seminar was to assist the participants to understand PROCMURA, what it is and what it stands for, and Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Africa. The Seminar was as a result of the request of the Director of Theological Advancement and Ecumenical Relations Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya, Fr. Evangelos Thiani, who had written previously to PROCMURA asking to have the capacities of their seminarians enhanced in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Africa.

FROM 1963 THE GREEK-SPEAKING CHURCH OF CYPRUS HELPED THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH IN KENYA BY BUILDING A SEMINARY AND SENDING MISSIONARY TEACHERS

In his letter addressed to the General Adviser of PROCMURA, the Director noted that the School does not offer special programme for Islam and Christian-Muslim relations except for the little that students are able to gather from the religious studies class. He also noted that the students have no idea of what PROCMURA is or what it does and that they

would be very eager to learn as much as PROCMURA would offer on the day deemed appropriate.

The Orthodox Church in Kenya as in All Africa was not founded as a result of the missionary venture in the 19th Century but as a result of the orthodox Diaspora from Greece, Syria and Lebanon. Many Greeks for instance settled in Alexandria from 1840s and orthodoxy begun to flourish with schools and printing presses established. African Instituted churches interested in the various forms of orthodoxy made contact with what has come to be known and called the African Orthodox churches in the USA which was not part of the canonical community of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

In 1946 the African Orthodox groups in Kenya and Uganda were received into the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. From 1963 the Greek-speaking Church of Cyprus helped the Greek Orthodox Church in Kenya by building a seminary and sending missionary teachers. Today the African Greek Orthodox Church in Kenya has its largest population on the African continent, and consists of more than a million parishioners. The Kenyan Archdiocese of the Alexandrian Patriarchate has

about 200 churches, dozens of church parochial schools and a number of seminary schools.

## 2. RATIONALE:

Carrying out of this project was in line with one of PROCMURA's programme focuses which is: To promote among the Churches in Africa, faithful and responsible Christian witness in an interfaith environment of Christians and Muslims that will promote and not unduly jeopardise the spirit of good neighbourliness among others. The second reason for this project was to promote PROCMURA's collaborative effort among member and non member churches of the All Africa Conference of Churches towards an understanding of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and beyond.

## 3. RECEPTION

The Orthodox team was led by His Eminence, Archbishop Makarios, who is the Archbishop of the Africa Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa in Kenya and the General Dean of Archbishop Makarios Orthodox Seminary. He is also a representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa in the international ecumenical gatherings. In the team were the Director of Theological Advancement and Ecumenical Relations Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya, Fr. Evangelos Thiani (the contact person), the Deputy Dean Fr. Phillip Mugadizi, two other faculty members, and three administrative Staff inclusive of the Registrar of



*The Team Leader,  
Finance and  
Administration Ms.  
Joy Wandabwa  
addressing the  
participants*

the Institution. A total of forty two (46) Seminarians from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Malawi, Burundi and Madagascar participated in the one day Educational Seminar. Among the fifty four (54) participants from the Seminary were three (3) female participants.

Preceding the commencement of the seminar, the General Adviser, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah along with the Team Leader, Ms. Joy Wandabwa and the Programme Officer, Rev. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel received Archbishop Makarios and all the faculty and administrative Staff members that came with the students for the Educational Programme. During the brief reception session, the Archbishop and his team were provided with basic information on PROCMURA and how both institutions could work more closely to promote Christian constructive engagement with Muslims for peace in society and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Africa. The Archbishop in his response commended PROCMURA and made a commitment



*A section of the participants following one of the sessions*

to stay on course with this collaboration that has begun. He further expressed profound appreciation for the warm reception accorded to him and his team.

#### 4. OPENING SESSION

As it is customary in PROCMURA, programmes usually begin and end with prayers, this was the case during the seminar, the Programme Officer, Rev. Ezekiel Gibson Lesmore said a prayer before the commencement of the programme. Then the Team Leader, Finance and Administration, Ms. Joy Wandabwa welcomed His Eminence the Archbishop Makarios and the entire team from the Orthodox Seminary to PROCMURA. She expressed her joy for this collaborative initiative. Ms. Wandabwa went on to say that the quest for knowledge demonstrated by the faculty and students of the Seminary on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa indicates the longing that we all share for peace in the society and peaceful coexistence between and among Christians and Muslims. She further stated clearly that ‘we are all learners and we should be open to learn from each other’.

After the brief welcome she invited the General Adviser, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah who on his part thanked His Eminence, the Archbishop Makarios of Kenya, saying that PROCMURA was honoured and indeed humbled by his presence at the Seminar. He concluded by expressing PROCMURA’s readiness to work hand in hand with the African Greek Orthodox Church in Africa and beyond on matters related to Christian-Muslim relations in Africa.

#### 5. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The presentations and subsequent discussions were guided and modelled along carefully thought thematic areas. Presenters spoke for forty five minutes each and allowed time for discussions and questions. Participants actually had many questions put forward which presenters responded to.

##### ***5.1 First Presentation: Religious Landscape of Africa, by Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah***

Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah facilitated the topic clearly showing how the subjective religious demographics of various countries in Africa clearly demonstrated the number game of religious affiliation in Africa. The majority/minority syndrome leads to the politicisation of religion and religionisation of politics impacting negatively on democracies, rights and freedoms of individuals. He advised that the common humanity Christians, Muslims and all others share, should enable us tread the road of peace and peaceful co-existence, in spite of the majority and minority syndrome which creates a religious and political gimmick that can poison relations

##### ***5.2 Second Presentation: PROCMURA, what it is and what it stands for, by Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah***

On this topic of PROCMURA; what it is and what it stands for, the General Adviser outlined the organization’s vision and mission, and its pertinent role in the continent of Africa towards Christian



constructive engagement with Muslims to build peace and peaceful coexistence. He went on to provide guidelines for Christian-Muslim relations in Africa. On Christian witness he cautioned against unethical methods of witness and reiterated the need for Christians witness to take their context seriously, particularly in interfaith settings.

### ***5.3 Third Presentation: Religion of Islam, by Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah***

Rev. Dr. Mbillah took time to carefully take the seminarians through basic tenets of Islam; its fundamental beliefs, articles of faith and thought forms. Turning his attention to the missionary nature of the two religions the General Adviser cautioned participants against public debates between Christians and Muslims ('Mihadhara') which is practiced in East Africa. He explained that for PROCURA, it is neither a useful method for Christian witness nor Muslim Da'wah (invitation to none Muslims to become Muslims), since such debates can poison relations.

### ***5.4 Fourth Presentation: Christian-Muslim Marriages and its Attendant Challenges, by Florence Iminza***



The Programme Assistant, Ms. Florence Iminza led the participants through the topic; Christian-Muslim marriages and its attendant challenges. She did this by juxtaposing the marriage concepts in the two religions clearly highlighting the challenges associated with such marriages. Whereas marriage

in Islam is a contract between a man and woman/women, in Christianity marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman who pledges for a life-long union before God. She explained that marriages between Christians and Muslims happen sparingly due to the biblical and qur'anic understanding of marriage.

She explained that apart from the view that Muslims who are able and willing can marry up to four wives provided they can care for them equally, and the Christians view that a man must have only one wife, the qur'anic view is that a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman while a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man unless he converts to Islam. These and many more are known to create challenges in interfaith marriages which need to be looked at carefully.

### ***5.5 Fifth Presentation: Religious Radicalisation and Extremism in Africa, by Rev. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel***



The Programme Officer, Rev. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel among other areas discussed the terms; described the behavioural aspects of potential extremists; outlined the forces that compel people into radicalisation and extremism citing various groups considered extremist. He went on to examine their formulation, organisation, activities and their funding. Finally, he proposed ways and means of de-radicalising and curbing religious radicalisation and extremism. This topic elucidated a lot of reactions given the recent escalation of terrorist activities in Africa.



*A participant from Malawi making his contribution*

## CONCLUSION

As it is usual with all the PROCMURA educational sessions, the discussion evoked genuine interest and concern for a deeper understanding of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Africa. Students who related the emerging issues in Christian-Muslim relations with their unique country contexts, sought to understand through asking difficult theological as well as philosophical questions. A lot of their questions were answered as many others remained unanswered because of the limited time available. Of course as we say ‘Rome was not built in one day’, the students appreciated their paucity of knowledge and understanding of Islam, thus committed themselves to give the discipline of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations its due attention.

## 6. CLOSING SESSION

After the participants filled in the evaluation forms, they were each given the PROCMURA calendar, to remind them of PROCMURA’s programme focus, mission and vision. The Programme Officer, Rev. Ezekiel, thanked the participants for their active participation and hoped that there would be more sessions of this nature in the future. Fr. Evangelos Thiani on his part, thanked PROCMURA for accepting to host the event and making it a success. In closing, prayers were done in the most melodious manner where the participants led by Fr. Evangelos Thiani, chanted the doxology and sang prayers in line with orthodox liturgy.

## 7. EVALUATION FEEDBACK

An on-the-spot evaluation was done and it indicated that all the participants were impressed and satisfied with the programme. They expressed delight with the way the programme was conducted. In particular they were satisfied with the presentations, plenary discussions, hospitality of PROCMURA Staff, and the Lunch and refreshment served. They requested for the programme to be organized more frequently and if possible made as an annual activity but for an extended time period of two to three days.

The group expressed strong desire and willingness toward mainstreaming of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations into the curriculum of the Seminary. The readiness was further confirmed by the official request made in writing by the Director of Theological Advancement and Ecumenical

Relations of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya, Fr. Evangelos Thiani and sanctioned by His Eminence Archbishop Makarios. PROCMURA was called upon to consider providing study scholarship to one of the faculty members of the Seminary to go for postgraduate study in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, which will no doubt benefit the Seminary in its quest for deeper involvement in Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and beyond. This marks the beginning of interesting collaborative initiative between PROCMURA and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa.

## PARTICIPANTS’ CONTRIBUTION

